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ABSTRACT

A 6-8 day secondary level social studies unit explores censorship in education through a variety of activities. Students participate in a preassessment poll measuring their opinions on academic freedom, answer a questionnaire entitled "What do you think?" concerning local school board and community powers, rank a list of possible teacher activities on a scale from acceptable to unacceptable, and watch the American Library Association film entitled "The Speaker." These activities are accompanied by discussion and analysis questions. A critical reading on student rights concludes the unit. Nine student projects suggested for evaluating the unit include a community censorship poll; a research/opinion paper; an interview with a school official, news editor, or lawyer; and a report on the American Civil Liberties Union. (LP)

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ACADEMIC FREEDOM: A CLASSROOM EXERCISE

by

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The past 20 years have witnessed increasing efforts on the part of many organized groups to restrict intellectual freedom. Textbooks have been excluded from state adoption lists, trade books have been removed from library shelves, and teachers have been intimidated.

Too often, these threats to academic freedom go unchallenged. The censors have their way because no one—citizens, parents, educators, or students—takes issue with them. Censorship often prevails by default. The challenge to social studies educators is clear. Every generation needs to understand and value the principles underlying the free exchange of ideas—a necessary foundation for an authentic democratic society. Students need to be explicitly involved in exploring issues surrounding academic freedom and censorship.

The unit that follows is one teacher's approach to dealing with this significant topic. The unit will occupy six-to-eight days of class time and is accompanied by a list of student and teacher resources.

TEACHING ABOUT FREEDOM AND CENSORSHIP

The goals for the unit are derived from *Student Rights and Student Responsibilities*, an NCSS position statement (1974), which states:

"Students and teachers must be free to learn and free to teach. A teacher's freedom to teach involves both the right and responsibility to use the highest intellectual standards in studying, investigating, presenting, interpreting, and discussing facts and ideas relevant to his or her field of professional competence. . . . Teachers must examine ideas openly in the classroom."

The specific objectives of this unit are:

1. Given case studies from the media, students will construct definitions.
2. After viewing the 43-minute film, *The Speaker*, students will analyze the tensions between freedom of ideas and censorship. The film is described more fully below.
3. Given specific learning activities, students will discuss their attitudes about school policies and classroom practices that relate to academic freedom.
4. Given instances of textbook censorship in schools, students will cite one example of language censorship, three examples of religious or ethnic censorship, and two examples of political or ideological censorship.
5. Given censorship issues, students will identify three conditions that can be used to judge a work to determine if it falls under the protection of the First Amendment.

Daily Activities—Day #1

Preassessment: Ask students to explain what they think academic freedom means. At the end of the unit, students will be asked to this again. Distribute the following survey, reproduced from "A Classroom Teacher's Guide to Academic Freedom," by James K. Uphoff and Ronald G. Helms (*Social Education*, April 1975, p. 223).

Guide To Academic Freedom

Students are asked their opinions on the following questions.

SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; U = Undecided; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree.

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| SA A U D SD | 1. Tomorrow's citizens and leaders should have wide exposure to discussion of controversial issues. |
| SA A U D SD | 2. A teacher's personal, religious, political, and economic beliefs should not come under examination when his or her professional competence is being evaluated. |
| SA A U D SD | 3. Classroom discussion should be permitted on points of view which are contrary to community standards. |
| SA A U D SD | 4. The Board of Education should have official form letters available to members of the community who might wish to complain about aspects of the curriculum. |
| SA A U D SD | 5. The Board of Education should have an official policy on academic freedom that clearly states the right of a student to learn and a teacher to teach. |
| SA A U D SD | 6. Parents should have the right to exempt their children from reading a book, but they should not have the right to exclude any or all curriculum materials. |
| SA A U D SD | 7. In their private capacity, teachers should be able to hold and express publicly their views on religious, social, and political matters. |
| SA A U D SD | 8. One of the central tasks of education is to develop the student's ability to question established views. |

SA A U D SD

SA A U D SD

SA A U D SD

SA A U D SD

SA A U D SD

SA A U D SD

SA A U D SD

SA A U D SD

SA A U D SD

SA A U D SD

SA A U D SD

SA A U D SD

9. The classroom should be open to outside speakers whose special competence the teacher may want to utilize in exploring a given issue.
10. In preparing for effective citizenship, students should learn the techniques and skills of lawful democratic dissent.
11. Students should have the opportunity to discuss controversial issues with persons having opposing points of view.
12. Teachers should promote the fair representation of differing points of view on all issues.
13. Teachers should be able to discuss with students political, social, or economic philosophies that are in opposition to those of the United States.
14. Teachers should be permitted to select textbooks and supplemental materials free of administrative and community restraint.
15. Instructional methodology should be free from community restraint.
16. Students should learn to consider the possible merits of differing viewpoints.
17. Students should be free to reach any conclusions upon an issue that fit the facts as they understand them, without any limitation other than that imposed by intellectual honesty.
18. A diversity of views is essential to a democracy.
19. Citizens of the community should have the right to examine and criticize school materials.
20. Every citizen should have the right to criticize or lawfully oppose any government policy or official without penalty or restraint.

After the questionnaire is completed, three students could be selected to tally class responses and place the results of the survey on the chalkboard.

The teacher can then select several items for deeper exploration, asking such questions as:

- What might be the reasons why people might agree/disagree with this statement?
- Do the answers we gave to this question suggest that we value freedom of ideas? If so, why is this value important? If not, what other values seem to be important?

Following the discussion students are instructed to offer their own individual written definition of academic freedom.

Day #2

The following two activities were taken from "Teaching About Academic Freedom in the Secondary School," by Robert Gerlach (*Social Education*, April 1975, p. 230).

Activity One: "Where Do You Stand?"

Ask the class to indicate what powers they feel a local school board and the community should have over the conduct of teachers by completing the questionnaire entitled *What Do You Think?*

Emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers and that each student should select those responses that best represent his or her own views regarding the appropriate powers of a school board.

After the class has completed answering the poll, tabulate the results. Then pose the following questions to the class:

- What kinds of teacher conduct did the majority of the class feel that a board of education had the right to regulate? Why? Who disagreed? Why?
- What kinds of activities did the class feel should not be regulated? Why? Who disagreed? Why?
- Are the results consistent with the definition of academic freedom originally developed by the class? If not, should the definition be revised? If so, how? If not, why not?
- Consider the following statement: "Teaching is a privilege, not a right. If one wants this privilege, he/she has to give up some rights." How do you think those who support this viewpoint would respond to the class poll? Why? Would you agree or disagree? Why?
- Consider also the following: "Freedom implies responsibility." What do you think this statement means? What responsibilities should a teacher be required to fulfill if he or she is to have academic freedom? What about students?

What Do You Think?

Check those statements with which you agree. School boards and/or represen-

tatives of the community should have the authority to determine:

- Whether or not a teacher smokes.
- Whether or not an instructor is academically prepared to teach.
- Whether or not a male teacher is permitted to wear a beard or moustache.
- Whether or not a teacher is allowed to be critical of school policies and practices and have his or her views published.
- Whether or not a teacher is allowed to date a student from school.
- Whether or not a male teacher may come to school with long hair.
- Whether or not an instructor may belong to the Communist Party or John Birch Society.
- Whether or not a teacher might assign a reading to a class containing language that could be considered obscene.
- Whether or not an instructor might write a play or novel for commercial publication that contains explicit sex as well as attacks on various religions.
- Whether or not a male teacher should wear a tie and coat to class every day.
- Whether or not a teacher should be permitted to refuse to pledge allegiance to the American flag because of his or her beliefs.
- Whether or not a teacher should have complete authority to select the books and instructional materials he or she uses.
- Whether or not an instructor participates in controversial political elections involving local issues.
- Whether or not a teacher can dress as he or she wills outside of the school.
- Whether or not a teacher has a hearing prior to possible dismissal or disciplinary action by a school system.
- Whether or not an instructor can associate with whomever he or she chooses outside of school.
- Whether or not a teacher may urge support for a political candidate in his or her classroom.
- Whether or not a teacher must swear (or affirm) that he or she will support the U.S. Constitution and laws of the state.
- Whether or not a female teacher wears a mini-skirt to school.
- Whether or not an instructor who is a social activist in the community and is involved with groups supporting women's liberation, black power, or the like is allowed to continue as a teacher.

Activity Two: "Actions Outside of the School"

Rank each of the following examples of teacher conduct outside of the school from that which is "most unacceptable" to you (1) to "most acceptable" (10)

- A teacher is charged by the police with public drunkenness.
- A teacher works as a "go-go" dancer on weekends.
- A teacher engages in peaceful picketing and public demonstrations.
- A teacher is a member of the Socialist Party.
- A teacher holds an elective public office.
- A teacher serves as a cashier at a local race track three nights a week.
- A teacher publicly admits to smoking marijuana.
- A teacher uses obscene language in several private letters to a friend.
- A teacher drinks a lot of alcohol at home on weekends.
- A teacher regularly dates one of his or her students.

Put the class on each item and discuss the responses.

Indicate to the students that the law in this area is not neat or precise. Generally speaking, however, the Court will rule against the teacher when his or her conduct in private life:

- (1) can be shown to have a negative effect upon his or her ability to teach or is "likely" to have a harmful effect upon the educational process; and
- (2) has achieved public notoriety through the actions or indiscretion of the teacher; or
- (3) involves students outside of standard or acceptable student-teacher relationships.

In addition, the courts have held that membership in unpopular organizations by teachers is not punishable so long as the instructors make no attempt to further any illegal aims of the organization.

Finally, the political activity of teachers is to be tolerated as long as it is not carried into the classroom by the instructor and does not interfere with his or her duties and responsibilities as a teacher.

Ask the class to reevaluate each of the examples of teacher conduct contained in the handout in light of the courts' position.

Days #3 and #4

Apply the concept of academic freedom to the film, *The Speaker*. This 43-minute film, developed by the American Library Association, focuses on the problems faced by a high school Current Events Club and its teacher-advisor when it decides to invite to a school assembly a university professor

whose research emphasizes the inferiority of the black race. This film is available free of cost from many public libraries, as well as from the Office of Intellectual Freedom, American Library Association, 50 East Huron Street, Chicago, Illinois 60611.

The teacher should preview this film prior to use with students. It is strongly recommended that an intermittent showing format be used. Stop the film at the first meeting of the Current Events Club and discuss the issues. Take a class vote. Stop the film at the second meeting of the Current Events Club. Discuss how the situation has changed; ask the students to vote again. Finally, stop the film after the third vote, and request student discussion. Now, ask the students to take a final vote.

The following suggestions are adapted from *Let The Speaker Be Heard*, by Jack D. Simpson and Cyrus F. Smith, Jr. (unpublished paper).

1. Ask students to consider how this film relates to their original definition of academic freedom.
2. Ask students to look for examples of social pressure that are evident in the film.
3. Ask students to relate the First Amendment to the issues presented in the film.
4. Write the following statement on the chalkboard, "Free Speech or the right to express yourself on any issue is basic to a free democratic society." Ask students whether they agree or disagree with this statement. Be sure that both supporting and opposing reasons are presented.
5. The following questions may stimulate further discussion:
 - Do people make better decisions when all points of view are expressed about a controversial issue?
 - Are there times when the right of free speech should be denied?
 - At times, is it better to leave some ideas unsaid?
6. Ask students to identify some of the forms of censorship in the film (student newspaper, community pressure on the school, school library and newspaper, self-censorship).
7. Ask the students if they have ever heard of a similar situation.
8. Design a role-play situation in which a parent wishes to exempt a child from a biology classroom teaching evolution. Assign the various roles.

Days #5 and #6

Have students read Allan Ornstein's article, "An Update on Student Rights," *Delta Kappa Pi Record*, Fall 1981. This article examines constitutional rights in areas that will interest students: corporal punishment, suspensions and expulsions, student records, personal and religious expression.

The following procedures are suggested as follow-up activities to this article:

1. Before students read the article, have students list or discuss their understanding of student rights and student responsibilities.
2. Ask students to share their own experiences with student rights.
3. Invite an administrator and/or a board of education member to speak to the class on the school district's use of corporal punishment and its relationship to student rights.
4. Invite members of the editorial board and/or advisor of the student newspaper to serve on a panel focused on student rights or the school newspaper.
5. Invite the Pupil Personnel Officer and/or a guidance counselor in to explain how changes in students rights have influenced their practices and policies.

Unit Evaluation

The following Action Projects can be used for evaluation purposes.

1. Construct and conduct a censorship poll of 25 adults in your community.
2. Write a brief 2-4 page research report on censorship of Academic Freedom.
3. Write a short 2-3 page paper on a current issue in censorship.
4. Conduct an experiment in censorship at school—submit a 1-2 page report.
5. Interview a principal, teacher, and religious leader on censorship. Write a one page summary.
6. Interview an editor of the local newspaper on an issue of censorship, and submit a one-page report.
7. Interview the faculty advisor for the school newspaper and submit a one-page report.
8. Interview a lawyer on censorship.
9. Call the American Liberties Union or a student's rights organization on censorship and submit a one page report.

These action projects are out-of-class assignments. This project is assigned on the first or second day of the unit. The student selects a project and has two weeks to submit the project and share its findings in class.